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“Beautiful, Ugly, and Painful” – On the Early Plays of Jon Fosse

Abstract of PhD thesis

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The topic and the method of the research

The dissertation examines the early plays of Jon Fosse, approaching them eminently as texts conceived for the stage.

The starting point of the research is a critical review alleging that the plays of Jon Fosse – due to their inaccurately presented characters and uneventful plot – are much less appropriate for stage as it follows from their success in both their country and abroad. Though this critical review questioning the modernity of the plays is insignificant in comparison with their European success, it is important to raise the problem whether Fosse’s texts are actually suitable for the stage. Thus the main focus of this dissertation is the early plays by Fosse – written between 1992 and 2000 –, adopting the methods of literary analysis and taking them in consideration as pieces of the dramatic genre in the same time.

Jon Fosse’s plays are marked by verbal and visual minimalism which, however, does not mean abolishment or reduction known from the theatre of absurd, but foreshadowing the essential; phrase of human experiences, wishes, and fears. This minimalism consists of concealed but rich thoughts and feelings and raises several questions without offering any answer to them or forecasting an ordinary and comforting ending. Fosse’s plays are built upon redundancy of words that are repeated with slight differences, without any punctuation and often only half-pronounced replies – all these lead to the texts’ openness, their ambiguity.

Thus the texts recall the free verse poems in their forms and furthermore they hold lyrical experiences through their interplay between form and content. Paradoxically, the lyrical eminence originates from prosaic content as it is redundantly, rhythmically formulated and the purposeful silences that break the dialogues. The simplicity in depiction of the dramatic personages, the plot, and the dramatic space is completed with the lyrical style questions, the dramatic value of the texts and the possibility of staging them. This dissertation contemplates on this ambiguity of this specific genre. The plays written by Fosse embrace lyricism, thus implicitly literature, however, they are utterly appropriate for a stage performance. The followings ten texts of the playwright are studied from the perspective of the theory of drama:

Someone Is Going to Come (1992)

And We'll Never Be Parted (1993)

The Name (1994)

The Child (1995)

Mother and Child (1996)

Night Sings Its Songs (1997)

A Summer's Day (1997)

Autumn Dream (1998)

Death Variations (2000)

Winter (2000)

The outcome of the research

Jon Fosse is often paralleled to Ibsen and Beckett – it must be add that all mainstream Norwegian playwrights have at certain point been paralleled to Ibsen. Fosse accepts and furthermore welcomes the comparison and the label of being “the second Ibsen”.

Contemporary plays are often characterized by a conscious inferiority for a smaller or bigger extent compared to other scenic effects: the visual or physical ones. But Fosse's plays always maintain their integrity through their special aesthetical authority. This means that his texts present indisputably the starting point of their performances and reject to be only figurants of them. Still this priority does not represent any obstacle for the polyphony of staging. One of the most important motives for it is that the plays direct our attention towards the limits and

possibilities of linguistic expression – and generally the limits and possibilities of any human expression.

The conclusion of the chapter entitled *On the Dramatic Expression* is that the idiosyncrasy of the texts are rooted in the particular tension and dynamism resulted from the open content and strict form, literature and theatre, and dramatic and lyric genre.

The chapter entitled *Form and Content* raises the question how the specific content of Fosse's plays are shaped and how do they conclude in an inseparable and unique whole. Researches often tend to separate these two entities or they differentiate between the formal redundancies and meaningfulness of the content – and therefore conclude in irreconcilable controversy of them.

Peter Szondi in his drama theory offers an analysis to Maeterlinck's works and implicitly an essential insight into Fosse's static dramaturgy. Szondi's statement that the situation takes over the action in the works of the French playwright is also viable in the case of Fosse's texts. This does not mean, however, that the dramatic form is abolished. On the contrary: the seemingly ordinary and trivial situations and states as well as the metaphors and the lyrical style create new possibilities towards the dramatic genre.

The first two plays (*Someone Is Going to Come, And We'll Never Be Parted*) show more connection to the Beckett oeuvre.

The second, larger bunch of plays (*The Name, The Child, Mother and Child, Night Sings Its Songs*) are characterized by realism in their topics and forms that reveals itself through much more accurate dramatic forms as well as plots located in ordinary family sets. In spite of all differences in their plot all the conflicts revolve around an unborn or to-be-born child.

The third group of plays can be related only through their complex time structure, thus through formal ties. *A Summer's Day* and *Death Variations* are both built on realistic family topics, namely grief for a close family member. Scenes thread on different time sequences offer the retrospective.

The two most intriguing piece of the Fosse oeuvre: *Autumn Dream* and *Winter* are rooted in predestination that renders a woman and a man to meet, their love that makes them cheat on others, how they desperately seize each other, and finally their struggle with each other. The structure of the *Autumn Dream* grasps the notion of time and the very subjective way we

experience it. The play entitled *Winter* despite its strict structure does not reveal anything certain about what lies behind its apparently realistic surface.

The next chapter is entitled *The Ineffable – On Language and Communication*. The plays discussed above – and generally all plays by Fosse – with their unique rhythm and their redundancies in language draw our attention to the relationship between speakable and ineffable and the possibilities and limitations of the language. Redundancies are never exactly identical; the text is in continuous movement through small differences, though its topic revolves constantly around one and the same point. And this point is “the ineffable”, the indefinable essence that does exist and creates its meaningfulness through the repetitive construction that appears to be deconstructive for the superficial glance. And this chapter attempts to oppose to this negative approach and deny the punctuality of parallels drew with Heidegger’s and Blanchot’s theories according to which these redundancies show a certain meaninglessness and confusing nature of existence. With the socio-linguist dialogue analysis method this chapter points out that the dramatic tension and quality of the plays are furnished by the intensity of their language that offers an intensive experience materialised by staging but also purely through reading.

As the chapter entitled *All the Nameless – On the Dramatis Personae* exposes it, the examination of the characters and the analysis of the language are inseparable. In the theoretical foreword I refer to critical reviews that regard Fosse’s characters as simplified patterns of relationships between typically weak men and typically authoritative women. This approach regards Fosse’s plays as pattern-like minimised rituals of the human existence. Furthermore, following the negative philosophy of Blanchot concerning their language and adopting Heidegger’s philosophy according to which the characters’ are seen as thrown into existence like marionettes and being deprived of any self reflection.

On the contrary, the characters distinguished by mystery, laconism, and embarrassment do not divulge their lack of personality but their mostly concealed past that shows them as people – according to Blanchot – who have never come into life. As neither the characters history nor their future cannot be known or predicted, our curiosity will never be appeased. These permanently emerging gaps in interpretation can be best described by Derrida’s notion of *différance*.

Though Fosse gives names to his characters, these do not give any further information regarding them as personalities. This fact – referring to Blanchot again and being viable for

the whole oeuvre of Fosse – paradoxically leads to the conclusion that absence creates closeness.

Related to the characters and being also true for the use of dramatic space it is to be mentioned that there are particular and constantly repetitive postures and gestures that characterize especially the family dramas taking place in internal spaces.

The chapter *Time Is Here* of the dissertation examines the texts from the perspective of their time structure: namely the linear and the complex ones. Redundancy of the language elements is appropriate when regarding the play as a whole; hence even the linear texts show ambiguity as often the starting point overlaps with the final. The plays presenting complex structure show even more noticeable tendencies towards the fact that the structure and construction of the plays influence their reading and interpretation. This is particularly true for the play entitled *Autumn Dream* in which behind the trivial plot and story evolves a particular structure that leads towards the incomprehensible fact of the ephemeral human life.

The settings of the plays written by Fosse are also characterized by ambiguity, as they convey seemingly trivial connotations, but on the other hand they hide some kind of general truth. The descriptions of the settings are also largely varied from detailed to inaccurate. In *Someone is Going to Come* the description of the setting offers even naturalistic details of the deserted house – generally the family plays seem to be similar to a catalogue of furniture concluding in alienating effect. While the plays usually take place in one and the same settings, in the *The Child* and *Winter* the settings change from scene to scene and *Death Variations* takes place in a mental space without any real object.

Interpretations of the plays by Jon Fosse might be considered as undemanding based upon their minimalism; however, in the chapters of this dissertation I draw attention to several aspects that reveal the complexity behind simplicity, dramatic tension behind static action, the secrets of apparently inhuman characters, and seek for meaning beyond redundancies in the language. All these aspects contribute to refutation of the critical reflexion that concluded in the lack of any dramatic tension and value.